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ABSTRACT

If for no other reason, junior high exists for the exceptional reading opportunity it provides; intensification and diversification of skills, some ease and stability in dealing with varying content structures, and enrichment of personal reading. The adolescent, at his peak period of personal reading, is still not fully determined as to his continuing academic purpose. Reading, both as an art and as a skill, assumes insistent importance in his work. Focusing on this period of immediate transition to major academic independence in reading, this paper examines the nature of the adolescent and the nature of the new curricular problems he faces. A random survey of junior high programs in selected areas of Canada and the United States is presented. Practical measures for meeting student reading needs at this time--programs, content, skills, interests, and materials--are emphasized. (TO)

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THE CRUCIAL TRANSITION YEARS

Three important years sculpted from a child's formal schooling, islanded as a period of guided passage from childhood to youth. Such is an ideal framework, unfortunately inconsistent with the actuality of the junior high years. Nonetheless, anyone who has worked closely with children of this age (11-14) or grades (7-9) acknowledge an array of differences -- physical, psychological and emotional -- which mandates a setting uniquely sympathetic to the pupils' needs. If for no other reason, junior high exists for the exceptional reading opportunity it provides: for intensification and diversification of skills, some ease and stability in dealing with varying content structures, and enrichment of personal reading.

In practice, junior high school is less than ideal. It was conceived prior to the insights of adolescent psychology solely as an administrative convenience to handle large numbers of children. Labeled by one expert as "America's greatest educational blunder",[3] it still seeks clear definition and direction. The "in-betweeness" of the junior high is attested by the very label "junior", by the ease with which either the lower or upper grade may be shifted physically at the dictates of space, by the curious amalgam of high school content and elementary school skills. (It is these arguments which support the move toward the "middle school".) The literature of the junior high focuses heavily on the mechanics of physical accomodation, only

recently on the need for the personal guidance and academic exploration which the age level requires. Even our own reading literature attends conveniently to components, organization, extension of skills while ignoring the nature and reading climate of early adolescence. It is hardly fair to make this generalization absolute. Many junior high systems have beautifully integrated the years to adapt to their students. The core curriculum itself was designed specifically for the junior high. Too commonly, however, the junior high has not adjusted to its responsibility or realized its opportunity. Some of the problems possibly result from the tendency to view the pupils as a group rather than recognizing the subtle differentiations within the age levels.

THE EARLY ADOLESCENT

Elementary and senior high school pupils are less volatile temperamentally, change and growth being less dramatic. The elementary child's progress is relatively smooth. School is usually a happy experience. Learning is fundamental, mastery and independence to be achieved later. Even though puberty may begin at age eleven, the sixth grader is usually seen as a child. At the other extreme -- always realizing the exception -- the senior high student is consciously preparing for exit, either to vocation or higher education. Such predictability is not characteristic of the early adolescent years, those of junior high age.

The early adolescent is varied in disposition and ability, experiencing rapid physical and psychological changes, searching for identity, life goals,

new relationships, greater independence, yet needing emotional support and clearly defined limits to behavior. Twelve's have boundless enthusiasm, seek peer association and approval, are delightfully open in and out of the classroom; they have longer attention spans and can do more independent work. They are less ego-centered and are interested in other's feelings, attitudes and beliefs. Thirteen is a year of complex transitions in body, mind, and personality. Moodiness and worry are common; the child is prone to be reflective, has a fondness for discussion periods and may be generally satisfied with school. While wishing to be treated as an adult, he will be resentful of adult restrictions, and school often appears as an endless tedious process. At age fourteen, the adolescent abounds in vigorous, robust expression. He is more able to do logical thinking and seriously considers his vocational plans. He is really more adapted to the departmentalized, demanding structure of the secondary school, his own disposition tending toward his older peers. Now such generalizations, although basically sound, hardly speak to the actual situation of the teacher contending daily with adolescents whose unruliness centers more on self than on the academic subjects of the curriculum. Nor do they say much about reading and the adolescent.

OBJECTIVES OF JUNIOR HIGH READING

Accepting the existing structure of the junior high school, however faulty, where does reading fit within its curriculum? Probably these years will be the last gasp of formalized reading instruction for the pupil. For reading does remain an acceptable and workable feature of the junior high curriculum. As we are aware, senior high provides little formal instruction,

reading being the task of the special teacher and more increasingly a recognized responsibility of the content teacher. The ultimate objective of junior high reading must be to assure security and comfort to the adolescent in the academic tasks ahead. Three vehicular objectives underpin this.

1. Reinforcement of the "common" skills. In the elementary years the child has been introduced to most of the entrance skills - word recognition, vocabulary development techniques, comprehension from identifying main ideas to minimal critical response. The time required to initiate skills rarely permits their sufficient exercise. Formal reading in grades 7 through 9 must provide opportunity for extension of these skills into new areas. Comprehension skills must be tested beyond main idea, the pupil challenged to evaluate, apply and think in new dimensions. Vocabulary tasks too must be expanded into ready use of context clues, study of roots and affixes, and broadened through purposeful search for and recording of new words and meanings. Simultaneously, the student must learn to cope rapidly with larger bodies of reading material, surveying printed materials, skimming and scanning, deliberately adjusting his rate to purpose and difficulty.

2. Diversification of reading attack. Junior high departmentalization permits shared reading responsibility with the content teacher. Throughout the elementary years, most reading tasks deal with narrative or carefully edited expository materials, the former more abundant than the latter. The child develops meager facility in adjusting to the varied structural patterns of specialized materials. Yet expository material will comprise 75 percent of his reading fare in subsequent years. Moreover, the organizational patterns of the subject matters differ. It requires little

argument to accept that mathematics has a vocabulary and conceptual structure distinct from social studies, as science has from language arts, as social studies and language arts have from each other. Access to these patterns and independence in their use may be achieved only with guided reading from the subject-matter specialist. There is evidence that little automatic transfer in reading methodology occurs from one subject to another; consequently the student needs to be introduced to and exercised in the separate demands of each subject matter. Further, it is to be expected that the study and reference skills will likewise be intensified and expanded within each classroom.

3. Enrichment of personal reading. Personal pleasureful reading peaks in early adolescence. In fact, the highest and lowest points of personal reading are the extremes of the junior high years: highest at grade seven and lowest in grade nine. How many ninth-grade teachers bewail that their pupils can read but won't! This desertion is probably a phenomenon of age; the excitement of self, friends and life's variety supersede the satisfaction of solitary reading. Nor is there a simple formula for sustaining the earlier interest of the child in private reading. Some children have acquired the habit and preserve it without inhibiting the social opportunities of growth. Others just quit -- permanently. Many lapse to be reinspired at a later day. This latter group comprises the junior high population most amenable to the subtle persistent provision of time for leisurely reading. Of course, we are unable to know which pupil falls into which category so all must be allowed the opportunity. We know the catalog of strategies here : classroom

libraries, an abundance of attractive books, sustained silent reading, frequent unevaluated book talks by teacher or pupils. Another possibility exists, which will be examined later, although it may be viewed as an administrative horror.

I have no intention of elaborating on the sub-skills, the alternatives, and the instructional modes of these simple guidelines. This task has already been done. The proceedings of past IRA conferences abound in detailed explication of every facet of junior high reading. These volumes may be unknown to many or seem as historical artifacts to others. It is unfortunate that these messages go unheeded, confirming the frequently voiced contention that we tend to repeat ourselves. But the specific development you may need is available. For example, the 1964 Proceedings alone contains no less than forty papers concerned with junior high school reading.(1) It would be tedious and futile to review the specifics of these presentations which constitute a veritable catalog of junior high reading issues and tactics, each subject often echoed in more than one of the articles.

OTHER READING ISSUES

There are however several other pertinent matters which deserve consideration here. Where, you may ask, does the special reading teacher fit in? After all, such personnel are more common at the junior high than at the senior high level. Such a specialist, I trust, would perform many of the tasks normally associated with the position: work with remedial

groups, consult with content teachers, offer model directed reading lessons in the classroom, and provide the time and atmosphere for extending reading to its ultimate developmental stage. Beyond that, however, the reading teacher ought to be an enrichment person, opening new doors for the young reader, making reading an exciting leisure opportunity. If so, then she must be permitted time to gain familiarity with the reading habits and interests of the young, to read their books and design stratagems for wedding book and child. (The reading class, an hour ought to be the unique moment of the school day when students may explore printed matter at any level, under any guise, at any pace.) This familiarity is normally expected of content teachers or librarians but, would you agree, other matters always intervene, the content or syllabus or other obligations of job or subject matter. Really it does sound like an extravegance, an academic luxury. But substantiation for the suggestion rests with experience. We speak of the right book for the right child at the right moment. Few teachers or librarians have leisure to explore adolescent literature. Yet how else does one avoid the possibility of violating a child's sensibilities as could happen by presenting a book about a happy father-son campingtrip to a child from a broken home? Too we have numerous apathetic junior high students, fully capable and equally turned off, who might conceivably be rescued by the kind of blameless leisure such a program embodies. Yes, it is idealistic and impractical, but it is practices such as these which partially account for the remarkable success of many individual reading programs that have flourished over recent years.

There is special concern with ninth graders in the junior high. Without older peer exemplification in the school and with their sights already leveled on the grown-up aspects of senior high, their growing indifference to reading, either as pleasure or task, poses a baffling problem. Here is the classic reluctant reader! These adolescents must become the transition focus. No level of the school system demands greater emphasis on reading in its every display than this, the final year of junior high. The student who leaves junior high with uncorrected reading problems stands a good chance of becoming a school dropout.(2) The student who can but won't read stands an equally good chance of becoming a lifetime dropout. If I were to select a single school year for intensive teacher in-service, it would be for the ninth-grade junior high teachers. More than anyone in the system they need to be knowledgeably convinced of the skills described above, of the practical approaches which will integrate reading into their curriculum, alert and sympathetic to every sign of student ennui toward reading. It is in ninth grade that I would insist on a specific free-reading component. Either we "catch" the student at this moment or risk increasing disenchantment in the years ahead. And the same formula would apply to any terminal transition year, whether eight or nine.

Remedial reading at the junior high level is yet another issue. During this current year I have conducted a course in secondary remedial reading. Our pupil-subjects were all grade eight or nine students at a neighboring school, residential in large part, somewhat "urban" by American standards.

This experience has led me to doubt whether "remedial" is the appropriate term for the junior high non-reader. We screened our subjects carefully, testing them and seeking advisement from teachers and counsellors. Our intent was traditional: a group of children of average intelligence two years retarded in reading. It was a profitable endeavor for everyone. Pupil gains were, as to be expected, somewhat mixed: sensational gains, disappointing stasis. In process we had a 90 percent pupil-attendance record on a voluntary Saturday morning basis. But it became evident that many of our pupils were not really remedial cases. Some were simply developmental; most were typical reluctant readers. Unquestionably we made a difference in the academic and reading lives of these sixteen children although much of our "magic" was simply a sustained "hawthorne effect". When before in their lives had these youngsters had total attention for seventy-five minutes a week from an intelligent sympathetic adult, especially a teacher? The pupils -- the majority of whom were the trouble makers of the school -- responded famously, perhaps only because the tutors were concerned and responsive to their needs.

THE SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Which perhaps emphasizes the major point of this essay, best illustrated by quoting a study made some years ago by William Paulo.[4] He selected ten poor and ten good seventh and eighth grade readers, all in the 90-110 intelligence range. After studying their home and school backgrounds, he found that all shared common physical and environmental circumstances except that the poor readers had had a succession of reading failures

{from their first grade on} with attendant academic consequences. He then asked the subjects to react to a set of self-constructed neutral pictures involving school and reading situations. As might be expected, the good readers demonstrated positive or optimistic views whereas the poor readers without exception expressed negative attitudes toward school and reading. Paulo concluded that : (1) the failure pattern unique to the disabled reader group had been a long-term one, originating for each at the first-grade level; (2) this pattern of failure had a markedly negative effect upon the attitudes of the disabled readers toward school and reading; and (3) by junior high school age, the disabled reader's negative attitude toward reading was firmly fixed as an integral part of his total personality.

I can only echo Paulo's recommendation that the junior high school particularly must make provision for fostering positive healthy attitudes toward reading. If such a spirit prevails throughout a faculty, supported by a vigorous effort to make reading a dynamic part of the curriculum, then perhaps the junior high may become a suitable transition stage in guiding early adolescents toward the increased responsibilities of continuing academic life.

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